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TITLE: How to Build an HIV Prevention Community Base in Communities of Color

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ISSUE: People of color are still largely disenfranchised from the agenda setting, decision-making and quality assurance components of the HIV/AIDS struggle. Moreover, people of color (especially women) continue to be the fastest growing sub-populations in the AIDS pandemic. Thus, a lethal vacuum exists between those most at need of prevention and care services, their concerned friends and families and those who provide or control the funding of such services.

SETTING: Communities of color advocacy groups and community based organizations.

PROJECT: To address this issue, Voices of Women of Color Against HIV/AIDS (VOW) was formed in 1995 to increase the involvement of women of color in all aspects of the efforts against the HIV epidemic. VOW is a women's advocacy group where women of color, both infected and affected, work collaboratively, without any power imbalances or preset agendas, to combat HIV discrimination and injustice and to advocate for improved prevention, care, service and access for women of color.

RESULTS: The group has grown to approximately 50 active women, with another 10-20 at-large members. The group has raised funds to send women advocates to important HIV conferences, nationally and internationally. The group produced the first-ever of its kind women of color centered prevention and treatment conference in New York City in 1998. Over 250 women and men attended the daylong conference, which was heralded for its success in bringing the issues of communities of color and women to the forefront. VOW members are active in identifying gaps and needs in prevention services and advocating via public testimony, letters and meetings for change. VOW and/or its members have been approached by leading institutions (which do not have strong links to communities of color) to co-sponsor events, sit on Community Advisory Boards, and to become staff members.

LESSONS LEARNED: VOW's experience thus far as a peer-run group is laudable in bridging the gap between communities of color and HIV prevention and treatment professionals. We would like to present our mission statement, group structure and format to the audience as a replicable model for use throughout the country. As well, we will provide technical assistance to workshop participants on best practices for establishing or maintaining an advocacy group/base within communities of color.

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